Washington Aqueduct: Testimony before the Council of the District of Columbia, Committee on Public Works and the Environment

Testimony of Thomas P. Jacobus General Manager, Washington Aqueduct before the Committee on Public Works and The Environment

February 5, 2003

Councilmember Schwartz and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to talk about improvements to the Georgetown Reservoir and the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System Permit that Region 3 of the United States Environmental Protection Agency has drafted for the Washington Aqueduct.

I am Tom Jacobus, general manager of the Washington Aqueduct. We are the Corps of Engineers organization that provides wholesale drinking water to the District of Columbia Water and Sewer Authority for distribution to the citizens of the District. Our other wholesale customers are Arlington County and the City of Falls Church. In total, we serve approximately one million citizens in this service area.

The Georgetown Reservoir on MacArthur Boulevard and Reservoir Road serves as the sedimentation basins for the McMillan Water Treatment Plant located by Howard University and Children's Hospital. As with any large industrial structure, periodic capital repair and replacement to counteract aging and wear is necessary. In this project the large metal sluice gates that control the flow of water through the basins along with other valves and chambers will be replaced. Additionally, the concrete bottoms and caps on the basins' divide walls need to be replaced. The overall value of the work being done is $ 4.9 million, and it is scheduled to be complete in March 2004.

In December, we drove pieces of sheet piling 30 feet into the earth to strengthen the divide wall between the two basins on the north end of the reservoir. Due to the ice and snow we had to accelerate the pile-driving schedule. We regret we may have disturbed local residents with the noise, and we appreciate their understanding of our operational need to do this. The pile driving process is complete. In the coming months residents will see trucks hauling debris from the basin bottoms and delivering new concrete to be placed in formwork being built.

When the project is complete, the casual observer will see no physical change to the landscape except that the cracked and deteriorating concrete will have been replaced. The basins and the controlling hardware will then be ready for many more years of reliable service. This project is typical of our work being done on behalf of our customers to ensure the continued safety and reliability of the public water system.

Turning my attention to EPA's discharge permit, let me first say that the proposed numerical limits relating to the suspended solids and aluminum concentrations of any water discharged to the Potomac River will cause us to change the way we currently remove and dispose of solids from the sedimentation basins. If the final permit contains the same discharge limitations as the draft, it will not be possible to comply immediately with those limitations. New infrastructure and processes will need to be evaluated, approved by all the agencies involved, designed and constructed. Therefore, we expect that at the same time the permit becomes effective, we will enter into a Federal Facilities Compliance Agreement with EPA.

In that agreement there will be conditions that allow for continued production of high quality drinking water while at the same time setting milestones for the design and construction of whatever is necessary to achieve the numerical limits in the permit. It is too soon to know what the financial or community implications of this are. However, alternatives that have been previously considered could result in a capital improvement cost of $65 million. All of these costs will likely be borne by our wholesale customers.

During the public comment period which closed on January 30, Washington Aqueduct did send EPA our science-based analysis and recommendations concerning the numerous and comprehensive special studies required by the draft permit. We believe that it is unnecessary and inappropriate for the District of Columbia water rate payers to fund several of the studies that are designed to look at conditions that will not exist as soon as the alternate methods for solids handling are in place and to fund those Chesapeake Bay-wide monitoring programs that the resource agencies should perform. If those studies remain in the final permit, we will have to address them again with EPA at that time.

Returning to the solids handling for a moment, it will be the responsibility of the Washington Aqueduct to develop feasible alternatives for compliance. These alternatives will constitute a federal action that will begin a public involvement process under the provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act or NEPA. We look forward to this involvement. We have always and we will continue to work as a good neighbor and a partner of the citizens of the District of Columbia as we perform our mission of providing an abundant supply of safe drinking water.

Thank you for the opportunity to make these remarks. I will be happy to answer any questions.

Additional information on the Washington Aqueduct may be found at:
http://washingtonaqueduct.nab.usace.army.mil/index.html